

# David Wells - An Appreciation

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On a cool, wet October day, I was making apple pies for the Cabot Historical Society Apple Pie Festival; covered with flour and cursing the dough, I was interrupted by a phone call. Ma was calling to tell me of the passing of David Wells, family friend and my professional mentor.

David and my mother had been childhood friends and had stayed in contact socially over the years. My first recollection of David Wells was in 1971, at my brother's rehearsal dinner, which was held at Fiddler's Green. David was the owner-operator, and while I cannot pinpoint seeing him personally, I remember the meal being great. David and his crew catered the wedding at my grandparents' house on Washington Street the next day. Once again, the great food and presentations were exciting for a young boy who loved to eat.

I knew after my sophomore year in college that I wanted to cook professionally, yet my parents advised me to finish my degree before jumping into the kitchen. I stayed at school through the summer, focused on class work and earned my degree: now I was

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ready to cook. This prompted my first professional meeting with David. He was a powerhouse! At the time he was running Locke Ober and we met at his house on Bay

Road. I could not get a word in edgewise... "Where do you want to work? I can get you into Lydia's or Jasper's..." This was exciting and nerve wracking, as I only had one summer of professional experience at the Winsor House, and I knew that Jasper's or Biba had no interest in someone so green. Upon explaining this, I was told by David in no uncertain terms that my lack of experience, and lack of passion ("Why didn't you at least bus tables in college?") were too big to overcome; he really could not help me, goodbye. Crushed, I went to work at the Leonard M. Eatery and started cranking away. Six months later, I received a call from David that changed my life forever.

David had moved on to become general manager of the Dedham Country and Polo Club and wanted me to come work for him. It was a commute, but it was worth it. I was working with fresh herbs, the best meats and scratch baking. This was where I really discovered David Wells in all his glory. Passionate, impatient, knowledgeable, focused and completely wild every single day, David was like a hurricane. Nobody knew which direction he was going, but there was never any doubt that he would be a force when he got there. I marveled at his combination of passion and knowledge. I laughed at his tales of far off events and the myriad offbeat methods he used to ensure their success. Mostly, I fed off his contagious energy. David Wells loved food, every day, without remorse or boundary.

During my time with David I worked with the great chefs of Nantucket, including Neil Grennin, who became a mentor and lifelong friend. While at the time I resisted many of David's simpler ideas (I was a burgeoning snob - a common occurrence for young culinarians), I realize now that he was absolutely correct. Serve good food, keep it simple and don't try to top the classics. When I first made Welsh Rarebit with David directing me like a puppet master, I thought it was the dumbest thing I had ever seen. The guests loved it. Today, my boys, Eli and Gage consider bacon, cheese and toast three basic food groups. I will make them Welsh Rarebit and tell them about David Wells.

While David and I debated the details, there is no doubt that he played a role in the biggest happening in my life. If I had not worked with David at the DC&PC, I would not have met my wife, Libby. I cannot fathom where I would be now without her.

David Wells was a man at least a generation ahead of his time. Chef, gourmand, entertainer, eccentric personality, David never found the perfect outlet for all of his attributes. In a sense, a day-to-day existence could not contain David Wells. The man was absolutely made for the Food Network. Watch any show, from Emeril to the 30 Minute Gourmet, and imagine David. He knew fine dining, but never shied away from Campbell's Cream of Mushroom as a key to many recipes. David's work in television displayed the earliest seeds of the Food Network, although most of the stars now don't have the energy or personality. To David all food was important; all food was worthy of discussion and debate.

I did not see David very often in recent years; I truly regret that. Every time we did get together, he had a piece of kitchen equipment, or some old notes or a new restaurant to discuss and share. I know he was proud of me and all that I have accomplished. I am proud to have worked with and known David Wells; he was the spark for many young cooks, and laughter was always part of David's stew.

After the call from my mother, I called Neil Grennin to let him know. I hope to see Neil at the service. I then got back to making the pies. I am a lousy baker, but I put a bit more energy and focus into making them great on a rainy night in October. I will bake apple pie more often now, and I will always think of David Wells when I do.

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